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ABSTRACT

The traditional ways of American Indian life and the more contemporary life styles are described in this paper. The conflicts which currently exist between the Native American subcultures and the mass culture are described in terms of "culture clash". It is noted that the traditional values of Native American societies were deeply rooted in their religious beliefs. The harmonious blending of the individual and the group with the forces of nature in the traditional Indian way is in conflict with the mass culture. Other areas in which this conflict occurs include tribal government, the concept of power, the social environment, and justice. The influences of the American Indian Movement and the Bureau of Indian Affairs on various areas of this conflict are described. (PS)

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WHAT PATH FOR THE NATIVE AMERICAN: TRADITIONAL OR CONTEMPORARY?

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A paper for presentation at the annual meeting of the Southwestern Sociological Association, Dallas, Texas, March 1974.

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Introduction

After a history of genocide, ethnocide and sociocide, the once proud Native Americans are now faced with the dilemma of choosing the path toward traditionalism or of becoming contemporary "progressive" Indians. No longer can we (they) afford to maintain the status quo of high suicide rates, infant and adult mortality rates, poverty and corrupt tribal government. Many Native Americans, undergoing an "Indianness" renaissance, now assert that the traditional social and political systems excelled, in many respects, much of contemporary white America's life style.

Native American radicals feel that when the white man came to this continent, he brought "whiskey, guns and lies, but worst of all he brought himself." These four elements now govern the Indian's life. Most Indians know that, like the buffalo, their traditions are nearly extinct. They would, however, like to have the opportunity to make their own mistakes rathern than to be compelled to rely upon the federal government and the paternalistic grip of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.

The American Indian Movement, founded for the purpose of combatting a double standard of justice, has been responsible for several recent conflicts. By examining this particular social movement, we can assess the nature of many Indian grievances and perhaps determine the appeal of this

particular organization. It is our contention that the major attractions of the American Indian Movement are those of hope, a feeling of self-respect, power, and most importantly, a feeling of belonging for those who embrace traditionalism.

It must be acknowledged that there are many inherent difficulties which are encountered by those who seek to revive the traditional ways of Indian life; but it must also be said that there are several ways in which traditionalism might be combined with contemporary, more "progressive" life styles which might be beneficial not only to Indians but to the rest of America. This is true, as has been pointed out by LaNada Boyer, in that Indians stand in a "coal miner's canary" relationship to the rest of American society; when the Indians are in trouble, the rest of the nation should take warning.

Traditional Versus Contemporary Life Styles

Today the Native American is largely defined as an ethnic minority group, a "sub-culture" or a "sub-group" living within the confines of the "mass-culture" or "dominant group." This particular "subculture" exists today under conditions which vaguely approximate tribalism.

There are many conflicts which currently exist between the Native-American sub-cultures and the mass-culture. Although some have defined these as redman versus whiteman conflicts, there are many other barriers besides that of simple skin coloration. Perhaps a much more appropriate manner under which to examine these difficulties would be that of "culture clash." This is most observable in assessments which have been made of ideological differences, especially those which concern our existence on our own Mother Earth.

The Native American culture, before Columbus or perhaps before Lief Erickson, had societies that existed without prisons, reform schools, insane asylums and old-age homes. During that time, such societies existed under conditions which could be very clearly described as tribalism, i.e., there was a very definitive sense of individual identification and group unity within a specific tribe.

By contrast, the mass culture of today offers us a great deal in the line of prisons, reform schools, insane asylums for the mentally ill, and old-age homes.

Tribalism may be compared to the mass culture as the gemeinschaft system is often contrasted with gesellschaft. The former is often described in terms of close-knit familial relations, primary group identifications, and life styles which are based upon personal and traditional considerations. It is frequently a type of social system in which there appears to be little need for prisons and penal systems since the individual is controlled quite closely by informal pressures and social codes of living. Mental illness appears to be less frequent, or at least is tolerated to the extent that the afflicted may continue to reside and function in the community; and the elderly, who are not arbitrarily classified as obsolete at the age of 65, remain as leaders of the community and provide the essence of communal spirit.

The more materialistic gesellschaft system, on the other hand, does not have such a closely-knit community. Secondary and tertiary contractual relationships may result in the need for penal systems, institutions for the mentally ill, and separate specialized agencies for those with personal problems. Since the materialistic values and patterns of life demand that the individual become vertically and horizontally mobile in the name of

"progress," one's own parents quickly become obsolete and his children become cumbersome. Today, we find day care centers for the very young and retirement villages for the very old, providing the freedom and autonomy for those of the median age to relentlessly pursue their own ever-increasing goals of the acquisition of material and monetary goods.

The traditional values of the Native American societies were deeply rooted in their religious beliefs:

> "The Indian religious trip is a deeply felt thing," Bryan explains. "Basically, it's a notion of worshipping and caring for what's here."
> . . . "The traditional Indian worship of God has been the opposite of compartmentalized religion. Where the European culture conquered nature, the Native American lived within it. The practice of his religion included a study of the harmony and balance of everything around him" (Maupin, 1973).

The harmonious blending of the individual and the group with the forces of nature was emphasized rather than the conquest of the forces of nature. The conquering and exploitation of new frontiers has become a "locked-in" fixation of the mass culture, often referred to as a type of "frontier mentality." The frontier mentality may be characterized as an extreme form of ethnocentrism, for it not only involved major "progressive" modifications and alterations of our Mother Earth, but it also resulted in the conquest and exploitation of a people who lived within nature. This particular brand of extremist ethnocentrism was demonstrated when Columbus captured Indian slaves (David, 1972), when the Spanish first landed on Northern American shores (Washburn, 1971), and even today. Indians, when confronted by this blatant type of ethnocentrism, have usually been given the option of "assimilate or be decimated." In more colloquial terminology, the alternatives presented have been: "Become like us because we are better," and "Our way will be best for everybody" (Brinkerhoff, 1973). Sad to say,

this policy is still largely practiced by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the paternalistic agency which controls nearly all Indian lands, job opportunities, housing, education, and other life needs.

> Today, 850,000 Indian people suffer a 42-year life expectancy. At seven times the national average suicide rate. Three times the national average infant mortality rate. An average income per year for a family of $1,500 or less with many living on less than $500 per year. The push-out rate in education is from 60 percent to 100 percent. Chronic ill health and respiratory diseases are common with Indian people. Housing is completely inadequate. The prisons are crammed with Indian people.
>
> The Native Sovereign People have become the most poverty-stricken, mistreated, suppressed people in the richest nation in the world, in this our own country. These conditions are an indictment against the United States Government, the Department of Interior, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the very insensitive, unconcerned, dominant society in our part of the universe . . . (Brinkerhoff, 1973:42).

We can no longer afford to maintain the status quo, including corrupt tribal government:

> Tribal government reform needed. Regardless of which side of the dispute you have been on, everyone should agree that we badly need extended hearings on tribal government reform. Our present governments were formed during the Depression, almost forty years ago. They may have been adequate for that time or they may not have been adequate. That is past. What is fact is that many tribes are now million dollar a year corporations today and yet they have the same powers and responsibilities as they did when they were hardly functioning at all. They need expanded powers and additional responsibilities clearly spelled out. Many of the decisions that are now made by the bureaucrats should be made by Indian people through referendum processes. Our tribes need to have their tax status clarified. They need to be told exactly what their responsibilities are with the 1968 Civil Rights Act which threatens to tear tribal governments to pieces.
>
> Congress may be in the mood to hold these hearings. Both Congressman Meed and Senator Abourezk have often indicated that they feel that this is an area that should be considered in any work their committees do this Congress.
>
> We should ask them for definite hearings in definite locations during the next two years that can result in reforms of the laws under which the tribes have to operate their governments.
>
> Each tribe should be freed from restrictions on the form of government so that they can choose for themselves how they will be governed. This can be done in the next two years if we are serious about such reforms (Deloria, 1973:8).

The tribal governments that exist today are often viewed as being more or less manipulated and controlled by the Federal government through the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Many so-called tribal leaders of today are referred tc as "puppets of the BIA" who do not really serve the needs of the people. Perhaps the original concept of tribal government was adequate and has merely become disfigured and distorted by the BIA, for example:

> The tribal council here is splitinto deep factions, as on most reservations. And while the Bureau of Indian Affairs pretends disinterest in tribal politics, somehow or another, ways are found to give backing to persons who are, in the BIA's views, cooperative (Akwesasne Notes, 1973:12).

These who come to be members on the tribal councils of today seem to be those of the BIA's choosing. Generally, those who are politically aggressive seem to be consistently placed in office through tribal elections; and it is generally a fact of life that a tribal election rarely attracts more than 20 percent of qualified potential voters. This process seems to contrast greatly with the conditions under which we were governed by more traditional leadership:

> Chiefs - We turn our minds to those we have asked to lead us. We acknowledge the heavy burdens we have given you, knowing that now you eat last, waiting for your people to be fed. Your tongue can speak only with our voice; your responsibilities are heavy. You have little wealth left, for you have shared all with us.
>
> Leaders! We demand even more keep your vision pure and clear, have wisdom and compassion in your thoughts. You are the servant of the people and our love and respect will be your reward (1974 Native American Calendar).

It seems everything has been taken from us including our best voices because "the Indians have been captives of the Bureau of Indian Affairs for so long that resistance has all but expired . . ." (Akwesasne Notes, 1973: 12). This comes from years of being told what to do by BIA agents, BIA experts, BIA officials in Washington, D.C., and traitors among the Indians. It comes from using white "boss farmers" who successfully and thoroughly

demoralized Fort Hall Indian cattle ranchers and eventually caused the complete demise of a once prosperous enterprise. It comes from the white man's discovery of the potentially increasing profits to be realized from wild rice, the legislation of wild rice seasons, the introduction of white agribusiness and corporate food conglomerates which drove the once prosperous Leech Lake Reservation Indians to a 90 percent rate of unemployment in only a few years. One of the major problems, then, for those currently undergoing an "Indian renaissance" is that they have few weapons with which to fight for survival other than that of courage.

> Courage is more than carrying a sign on a picket line. It is more than the occupation of Alcatraz. It is even more and mightier than the occupation of Wounded Knee. Courage is the ability to stand up for one's own opinion, to mobilize those who are in agreement, and to state one's opinion in public, in the tribal meeting places, and in the newspapers (Wassaja, 1973:2).

In summary, it might be claimed that the American Indian Movement is the major organization which provides the support and necessary reinforcement for the development of courage among the Native American people. To join such a social movement, however, is not without its costs, both socially and psychologically.

One young Indian man, for example, took part in the occupation of Alcatraz. During that symbolic event, he spoke brave words and stood "tall and proud." Now, however, this same young man is afraid to state his opinion because he does not want "to be isolated."

> It seems that those who have the true gift of courage must come to expect subsequent isolation, partially because independent thinkers are often less than welcome by conformists. The larger society often does not like and will attempt to isolate the one who speaks the truth and who stands up bravely for what he believes to be the truth. But what does it profit a man to speak a half-truth? A half-truth is little short of a lie, and in the practical end of any issue, it becomes a lie.
>
> Courage is needed today. Intellectual and moral courage. In the old days it was given to all, this type of courage (Wassaja, 1973:2).

Often the strategem used to suppress the lips of the Indian spokesman goes beyond mere "isolation." A recent and flagrant example is that of a nine year old girl who was shot on the Pine Ridge Reservation:

> Oglalla Sioux Tribe, Pine Ridge, S.D. - The latest victim of the harrassment and brutality campaign allegedly instigated by Tribal Chairman Dick Wilson and his "goon squad" is a nine year old girl according to the Crazy Horse News.
>
> There have been countless other victims of beatings, shootings, rapes and harrassment from this single instance of corrupt tribal government. By directly attacking the American Indian Movement and its supporters, by sowing confusion and disunity, and by frequently observed methods of offering money, drugs and liquor as well as creating an air of distrust, it is believed the government hoped to eliminate AIM from the scenes of Indian affairs (Wassajo, 1973:11).

It seems that the four elements of whiskey, guns, lies and - last but not least in any respect, the white man - now govern the Indian. This particular state of affairs is in no way comparable to our true tribalistic form of government.

Some of our people complain of our tribal council members; they are often accused of dishonesty, despotism, tyranny and nepotism. Those who complain realize that our people starve because they cannot eat lives; and they know that a few grow fat because they have learned to lie. A change is very definitely needed and it is this type of change which is emphasized by the American Indian Movement. AIM is more than simply another organization addressed to the daily ills of the Indian, for it is a social movement. It offers hope where hopelessness has been the norm; this is easily evidenced by the high rates of suicide, alcoholism, and the sniffing of various fumigants. Hope is one of the major attractions for AIM participants. The American Indian has watched for many long years as his culture and his self-concept has been debased and denigrated by literature, movies, history text books, and the massive invasion and intensive scrutinization

of anthropologists, sociologists and missionaries. The American Indian Movement, which is basically a religious movement, cherishes and upholds our beautiful traditional values and ideologies; such things are not dissected and analyzed as has been the case with many unjust materials authored by non-Indians, Task Force members and white "Indian experts." Therefore, self-respect, a feeling of belonging, and the possibility of being able to manipulate the social environment to meet our own needs are also important elements of the American Indian Movement.

Perhaps we should now turn our discussion to the concept of power. Sometimes the issue of power is mistaken for the issue of violence. Contrary to the pronouncements of the popularized mass media, violence is not one of the policies of AIM. Leonard Crow Dog, a Lakota Medicine Man and Spiritual Leader of AIM, said, "We have tried to tell them with our lips; now we must use our bodies." Violence is regarded as being tantamount to suicide; and suicide is viewed as a sacrifice. Thus, those individuals who went to Wounded Knee during that occupation essentially placed their own lives on the line for all Native American people; they risked their own lives for a religious ideology.

Many of our traditional holy men view the American Indian Movement as a reappearance of the old warrior society which existed long ago for the protection of the Indian people. The old warrior society existed as a defensive means. These particular groups operated on the basis of four basic principles: to protect the old ones, the helpless ones, the children and the unborn.

A revival of traditional values - with an eye on what might be termed the "progressive society" - is much needed, perhaps with a combination of the best parts of both. Our people must have tribal government based on

traditional ways, suitable to gemeinschaft life styles rather than a plethora of mini-Watergate scandals on a national basis which are a direct culmination of the gesellschaft mass culture. If we can attain this goal, we can once again achieve a sense of identity and unity. In addition, given some study and appreciation, we can recognize that our traditional values have much to offer to a nation that is, at best, in a great deal of trouble. We can have schools which teach traditional values through Native American Studies to combat the 60 to 100 percent push-out rate and to help enhance Indian student self-concepts. In a few rare instances in which Indian schools have been established, e.g., Wyoming, it has been reported that running away, glue sniffing, and dropout has been drastically reduced.

A number of drastic adjustments must be made for the Native American to survive prospective mental, spiritual, physical and social changes. Currently, the concept of justice is only a rhetorical and meaningless word for us (some Chicanos refer to this concept as "Just Us!"). As AIM members, we have been labelled as Communists, militants, gutter rats and dopers in efforts by others to stagnate the movement and to discredit our tactics. The "Communistic charge" has even been entered into the Congressional Record and reprints disseminated to many Native Americans as an example of one hideous attempt to factionalize our Indian support; but Horton and Leslie (1970:54) describe the ease with which such libelous and unfounded accusations can be made in that particular publication. We should not, however be so distracted with labelling mechanisms that we do not heed the major issues.

After Wounded Knee Number One, Black Elk declared:

> And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud, and was buried in the blizzard. A people's dream died there. It was a beautiful dream. . . . and I, to whom so great a vision was given in my youth, you see now a pitiful old man

> who has done nothing, for the nation's hoop is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead (Neihard, 1972).

Black Elk, when speaking of the Sacred Hoop, referred to tribalism, the unity of all people in one accord and one mind. The Sacred Tree, the protector of the people, the power of growth can only mean one thing: the leadership of the people. Perhaps it is within mankind's destiny to mend that sacred hoop and to revive the sacred tree, for the benefit of all mankind.

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